



City of Chattanooga

Mayor Andy Berke

City of Chattanooga, Tenn. Comments Concerning Internet Adoption and Digital Equity

To the U.S. House Committee on Energy and Commerce

Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr., and Ranking Member Greg Walden

Communications and Technology Subcommittee Chairman Michael F. Doyle and Ranking Member Robert E. Latta

Submitted for the Hearing on Internet Adoption and Digital Equity

January 29, 2020

Dear Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member Walden:

I write on behalf of the City of Chattanooga, as the Committee explores these bi-partisan issues of Internet adoption and digital equity, to share our community's work to improve and leverage both for the betterment of every resident.

Once dubbed "the dirtiest city in America" by Walter Cronkite, Chattanooga has long-since reinvented itself, launching a decade ago the first fiber-optic network in the Western Hemisphere capable of delivering 1-gigabit (and now 10-gigabit) speeds to any home or business. In the first five years as a community asset, according to researchers at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and Oklahoma State University, EPB's network has returned a \$1.3 billion dollar economic impact - quintuple its initial investment - and created or saved more than 4,000 jobs.

This is all to illustrate how deeply rooted Chattanooga's story is in Internet adoption. But, as the world continues to be transformed by rapid technological change, increased access is, on its own, simply not enough. We must absolutely invest in the essential infrastructure required to connect every American, but we need to account for and fund the digital equity and inclusion efforts required to give that connectivity meaning and value.

Chattanooga's success has depended not just on an "if you build it" broadband strategy, but through investment in digital equity and inclusion. Talent is distributed equally throughout every neighborhood in this great country, but, too often, resources are not. Even with the fastest, most pervasive internet in the world, still some Chattanooga residents, urban and rural, remain disconnected. Being caught on the wrong side of the digital divide — whether due to affordability, lack of access to a device or a host of other barriers — can have a devastating impact on economic mobility, educational outcomes and overall quality of life.

Our city and county governments both have worked to support efforts and organizations doing the vital, on-the-ground work of connecting residents to 21st century opportunity. From charging EPB with providing a reduced-cost, high-speed home internet plan for low-income families with students in our local schools to directly investing in the digital inclusion efforts of non-profit partners through our City's budgeting process, equity remains at the very core of our community's strategy.

One such initiative, Tech Goes Home, has connected more than 4,500 residents since its first course in 2015. Adapted from the successful Boston model, Chattanooga and Hamilton County's marquee platform works with trusted local partner organizations across the community to provide residents with 15 hours of digital skills training; a new, subsidized device like a Chromebook or iPad; and assistance to acquire low-cost home Internet. Not only does the program support agency in a technology-driven economy, it deeply connects issues of digital inequity with the core work of other service-oriented organizations.

Uzma, a recent participant in a Tech Goes Home class through her employer, had to re-start her career as an early childhood educator when she emigrated from Pakistan to the United States, re-enrolling in college. "I got my admission, went to college, and when I looked around, everybody pulled out their laptops," she lamented, "And I was just looking at my paper and pen." Thanks to Tech Goes Home, she now says, she's confident with a computer, has completed two certifications and is getting her associate's degree - in addition to being back in front of her own early childhood classroom.

Indeed, digital equity and economic development go hand-in-hand. According to a recent analysis by the Federal Reserve in St. Louis, 82% of all middle-skills jobs, which represent the largest workforce in the South, require digital skills - and those jobs requiring digital skills pay, on average, 17% more than those that do not. By working to both connect and educate job-seekers, we're growing a more resilient, future-ready workforce.

Entrepreneurship, too, increasingly depends on these digital skills - from the products and services themselves to marketing and raising capital. Small businesses are the heart of the American economy. In Tennessee alone, businesses with fewer than 100 employees account for more than 50% of all jobs statewide. As technological innovation disrupts existing industries, new startups are becoming even more important to Chattanooga and Hamilton County's economy. These entrepreneurs are creating the jobs of the future and ensuring that the community stays innovative and competitive for years to come - and, through digital inclusion partnerships with entities like our local Urban League, La Paz and various startup accelerators, we're ensuring inclusive access to this economic growth and prosperity.

Through this lens of digital equity, we recognize that disconnectedness - whether a lack of internet access, limited or no access to a device or a need for fundamental digital literacy and training - has a disproportionate effect on success in the 21st Century. As an increasing percentage of life takes place at least partially online - from how we communicate, to job applications, to banking and so on - we must work to ensure that not just some, but all residents, can participate fully in the digital world if we expect our communities to thrive.

Sincerely,



Mayor Andy Berke

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